

# The Essay: a guide

Essay · From title to final draft · Handout

**The question behind the mark:** *Does the student provide a clear, coherent and critical exploration of the essay title?* Marked out of 10 by an IB examiner, two thirds of your TOK grade.

## 1 · The rules

- **One of six titles**, published for your session, copied **word for word** as your title. A reworded title is marked against the original.
- **The areas of knowledge the title names.** “Two areas of knowledge” means two you choose, not three.
- **At most 1600 words**, quotations included, footnotes and references not. Footnotes may not carry argument. The examiner stops reading at word 1601.
- **Three meetings** with your teacher (titles, plan, one full draft), recorded on the TK/PPF form.

The top band asks for five things: a sustained focus on the title, effective links to areas of knowledge, clear arguments supported by specific examples, **implications**, and **evaluation** of different points of view.

## 2 · Read the title before you answer it

The commonest reason a tidy essay ends at 4 or 5 is the **key-term swap**: the title’s key term is quietly replaced by an easier one, and the essay answers the easier question.

| Form of the swap         | Example                                                                                      |
|--------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| An easier neighbour      | <i>reliability</i> becomes <i>usefulness</i> , though a tool can be useful and unreliable    |
| A literal misreading     | “all things are numbers” answered by showing that things <i>can be labelled</i> with numbers |
| Several meanings at once | <i>flawed observation</i> as imprecise instruments, fraud and propaganda in one essay        |
| Stretched too wide       | <i>doubt</i> widened until every counterexample fits inside it                               |
| Set impossibly high      | <i>justification</i> defined as “beyond all doubt,” so “no” follows from the definition      |

**The test.** Write down your working definition of the key term, then name one example that would come out *the other way* under it. If you cannot, the definition has already decided the answer. Bring the result to the plan meeting.

Also ask: *whether* or *how much*? What *is*, or what *should be*? Which words carry the title?

## 3 · Plan by positions, not by examples

| Your outline reads                                               | It predicts         |
|------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|
| example 1, example 2, example 3 (each with “This shows that...”) | 4 or 5              |
| all the pros, all the cons, more pros so I argue pro             | a descriptive essay |
| reading A, reading B, what decides between them                  | can reach 8         |

A strong thesis is often **conditional**: *when* or *to what extent*, and *why*. “Interpretation produces reliable knowledge to the extent that a discipline’s methods let other people check it.” It should read naturally straight after the title.

## 4 · Pair your cases

In each area of knowledge, set a case where the method worked beside one where it failed, and **name the variable that separates them**. Then look for the same variable in the other area. From the course: Millikan and Ehrenhaft · Wegener and the Higgs boson · Kahneman and Tversky’s findings and the social-priming research.

## 5 · Decide

Balance is not an answer. Somewhere there must be a sentence that asks *which of these is right, and why?* and answers with something other than “both,” “balance” or “it depends.” A conditional answer (“yes, as long as...”) is a decision. Circle every verdict without a measure (“matters a lot”) and write *by what measure?* beside it. Not deciding: a “however” paragraph ending “the thesis is confirmed,” imagined experts taking turns, a raft of rhetorical questions.

## 6 • The other side, at its best

Awareness is mentioning an objection; **evaluation** is stating it in its strongest form, ideally in a real thinker's words (Popper, Kuhn, Oreskes), and showing why your position survives or how it must change. A rival dismissed by a definition has not been answered.

## 7 • Say what follows

Write one paragraph that begins *If this is right, then...*: what follows for the knower, the discipline, public disputes? Implications are in the top band and the part most often left out.

## 8 • Examples that decide something

- **Analysis at least half of each paragraph** (Bastian). Five sentences of story and one of "This shows..." is a caption.
- **Swap test**: what does this example decide that another example would not?
- **Real examples only**: a name, a date, a source. No "a historian could...", no flat Earth, no Galileo-versus-the-Church fairy tale. One personal example, analysed, beats a famous one retold.
- **Relabelling test**: could the "mathematics" section be renamed "technology" without changing a word? Then it is not about mathematics.

## 9 • Sources, introduction, conclusion

- Sources set a floor, not a ceiling. Check every fact in the case that carries your argument; write *suggests* where you cannot write *proves*; quote only what the source says; remove `utm_source=` tags; cite AI tools if you used them.
- Write the **introduction last**: your reading of the title, your answer, the route. No dictionary definitions, no warm-up.
- **Card test**: the main claim of each paragraph, read in order, should answer the title on its own. Link ideas with *because*, *but only if, this fails when*, not with "Moreover."
- The **conclusion** answers the title in its own words, adds no new example, and does not apologise.

## 10 • The three meetings

1. **Titles**. All six, each with your first reading of the key term and one possible answer. Choose the title where your answer is most interesting.
2. **Plan**. Working definition, the example that comes out the other way, thesis, outline in positions. This is the meeting that matters most.
3. **Draft**. One full draft gets comments. Before you upload, point to the sentence where you dealt with each one.

## How TOK counts in the diploma

Your two marks are combined, the essay counting twice:  $\text{essay} \times 2 + \text{exhibition}$ , out of 30. The IB turns that total into a grade from **A** (excellent) to **E** (elementary), with grade boundaries set anew each session. The TOK grade then meets your **Extended Essay** grade in this table, which gives up to **3 of the diploma's 45 points**:

| TOK ↓ · EE → | A    | B    | C    | D    | E    |
|--------------|------|------|------|------|------|
| A            | 3    | 3    | 2    | 2    | fail |
| B            | 3    | 2    | 2    | 1    | fail |
| C            | 2    | 2    | 1    | 0    | fail |
| D            | 2    | 1    | 0    | 0    | fail |
| E            | fail | fail | fail | fail | fail |

**An E in TOK or in the Extended Essay means no diploma**, however good your six subjects are. So does a missing component: no exhibition or no essay means no TOK grade. The other failing conditions: fewer than 24 points in total; CAS not completed; a grade 1 in any subject; grade 2 three or more times; grade 3 or below four or more times; fewer than 12 points from higher-level subjects or 9 from standard-level subjects (with three of each); and any case of academic misconduct.